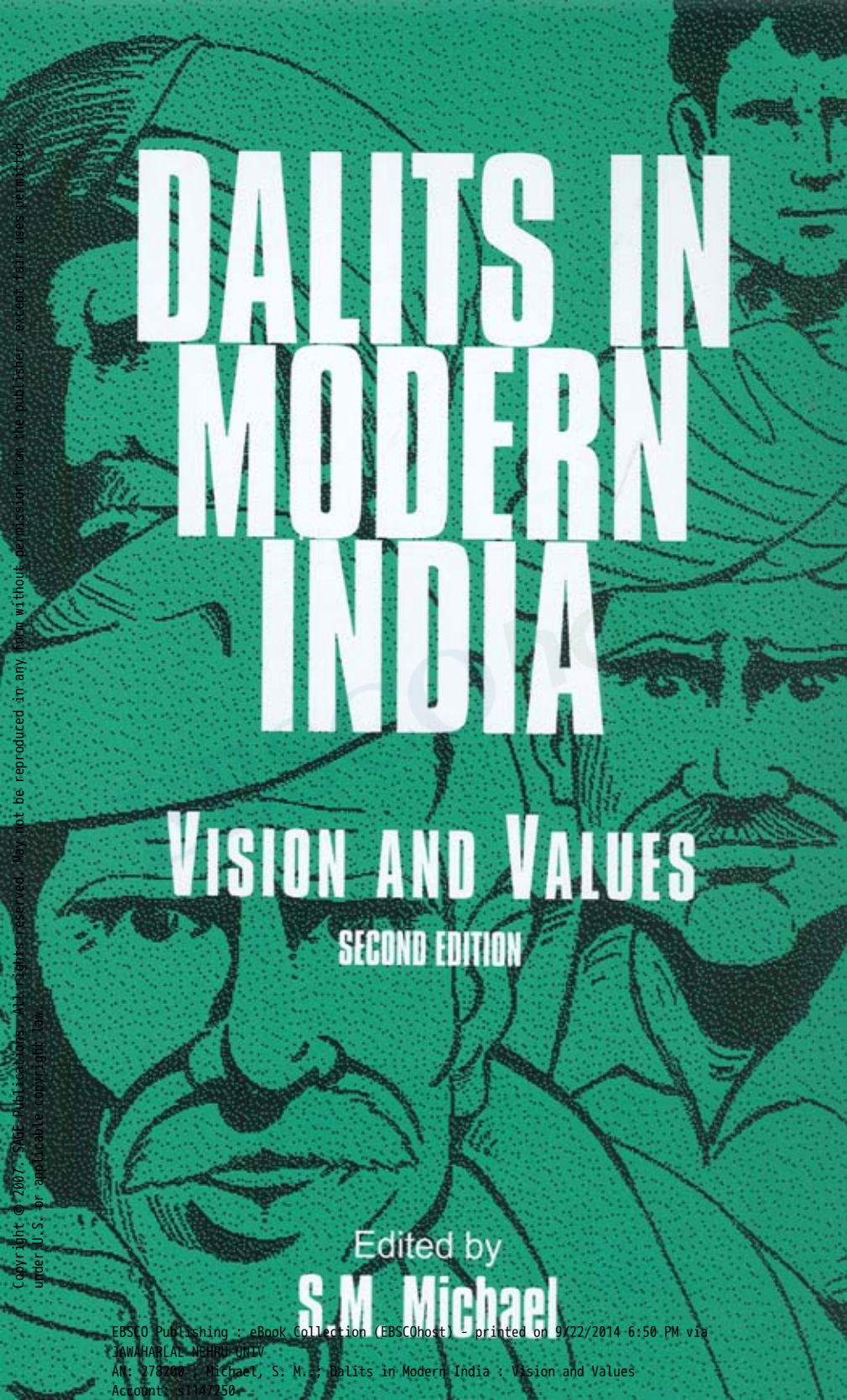

DALITS IN MODERN INDIA

VISION AND VALUES

SECOND EDITION

Edited by

S.M. Michael

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To

Dr Stephen Fuchs

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S.M. Michael

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Introduction

S.M. MICHAEL

Sociology grows and changes continually in response to new phenomena within world societies, to discoveries and insights within the discipline itself and to the mandate for ever-increasing relevancy that comes from the very people whom sociologists study. Today, prominent aspects of world economic, political and social relations revolve around issues of inequality, those based on class, caste, race and gender. In the context of India, anthropological and sociological attention to the study of the Untouchables, now known as Dalits, represents a major trend in Indian sociology.

As has been rightly argued by scholars, those who occupied the bottom rungs of society were invisible owing to the cognitive blackout perpetuated by the upper caste, middle class, urban, male researcher. Today, however, they are in full view and demand their legitimate share of representation of knowledge. It is further argued that the attempts to create their own knowledge system are essentially aimed at destroying the caste system that is constructed through the complex hierarchies of labour, sexuality and knowledge.

Throughout history, sociocultural and political situations have been changed by the power of certain ideals and visions. Such a tremendous change is in progress in traditional India and the old values related to caste relationships are under great strain. It will not be an exaggeration to say that one of the profound changes in contemporary Indian society has been the Dalit transformation of our times. As will be shown in brief in this introduction and more fully in several chapters in this volume, the Dalit vision of Indian society is different from that of the upper castes. The Untouchables have come to a new sense of their new humanity and are forging ahead to shape a new modern India. It is appropriate, therefore, to explore the social, economic and cultural content of this transformation. We also need to focus upon its relevance for the nation and

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its possible implications for our future. Dalit sociology studies this aspiration and struggle of the marginalised masses for a new humanity based on the values of equality, social justice and human dignity.

It might be suggested that we dispense with visions entirely and deal only with reality. But that may, in fact, be the most utopian vision of all, for reality is far too complex to be comprehended by any single mind. Visions are like maps that guide us through a tangle of bewildering complexities, and like maps, visions have to leave out many concrete features in order to enable us to focus on a few key paths to our goals (see Sowell, 1987: 13–17). The term used here, 'vision', is not a dream, a hope, a prophecy, or a moral imperative, though any of these things may ultimately derive from some particular vision.

The aspirations of contemporary Dalits are completely different from those of Dalits in traditional India. This change is due to the difference in the vision perceived by the Untouchables of the past and of today. Visions set the agenda for both thought and action; philosophical, political, or social theories are built on them. Believers in one vision will view themselves in a very different moral role from the followers of another. The ramifications of such conflicting visions extend into economic, judicial, military, philosophical and political spheres. This is made clear in the case of Untouchables in the history of India.

Increased intellectual activism has marked Dalit–Bahujan cultural life at both the national and the regional levels in recent years. An interesting feature of this development is that the growth is well outside the formal educational sites that are supposed to be the normal locations for such a flourish (Guru and Geetha, 1997). This new trend of Dalit intellectual activism need to be understood sociologically.

The Dalit intellectual, social and cultural activism in contemporary India, thus, represents a very interesting scenario in which an urgent need is felt to make sense of Dalit reality at an abstract theoretical level. These intellectual efforts also show that Dalit theory might acquire a critical mass in the future.

All the same, it is well known that there is an intellectual critique and challenge to the very term 'Dalit' especially from the post-

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modernist and post-structuralist scholars. Some intellectuals and activists are of the view that the term 'Dalit' is hostile to the ex-Untouchables of today and this term has no ontological abilities and hermeneutic capacities of its own to help the ex-Untouchables in their total emancipation. Thus, the category Dalit faces violent rejection both from the Dalits and from the non-Dalits.

There are two sets of arguments that have been put forward by scholars while responding to this theoretical construct of the category Dalit. Professor Romila Thapar believes that there is a notion of 'out of date history' and in this notion of history, certain categories lose their significance, for example, the Arya–Anarya category. By the same logic, one can also argue that categories like Shudra, Adi-dhamma, etc., have also become part of the 'out of date history'. She, however, maintains that Dalit is a specific category and that there is a political necessity to hold on to it. Satyanarayana, another scholar, says that it is important to look at the category Dalit as a construct achieved through recruiting and restoring the hidden culture and textual history of Dalits. Without understanding this cultural and historical rootedness of the category Dalit, it is not possible to understand the complex and pluralistic culture of India (Guru and Geetha, 1997).

Thus, it is true that the subject 'Dalit' is under continuous scrutiny and critical examination. However, many scholars and activists feel that the category Dalit has had a promising start and will have a better future and thus are not ready to give up claims to this category that easily (see ibid.: 18–19). However, we need to be open to theoretical arguments in favour of the redefinition of this category and the possibility of more rigorous arguments. For this there is an urgent need for Dalit epistemology and Dalit knowledge systems.

Dalit sociology aims at knowing what the Dalit knowledge systems are and to what extent they are useful in recovery for a contemporary project of Dalit emanicipation. This need is best explained as an impassioned search for a way of knowing that will recover Dalit lives and agencies from the frozen times of the past. Knowledge and epistemologies thus assume a centrality in these resolutions of Dalit questions (see ibid.).

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UNTOUCHABLES BY VARIOUS NAMES

To be an Untouchable in the Indian caste system is to be very low in, and partially excluded from, an elaborate hierarchical social order. Untouchables are persons of a discrete set of low castes, excluded on account of their extreme collective impurity from particular relations with higher beings (both human and divine). They make up about 16 per cent of the Indian population and number about 138 million. They have been called by various names such as 'Untouchables', 'Harijans' (a glorified term, coined by Narasimha Mehta and adopted and popularised by Mahatma Gandhi), 'Exterior Castes' (a term used by J.H. Hutton), 'Depressed Classes' (a term used by British officials), 'Outcastes', 'Pariahs' (commonly, but undoubtedly derived from the Tamil word *para* or *parai*, the drum, see Deliege, 1997). In more ancient times, the terms 'Mlechha', 'Chandala' (terms used by Manu), also Panchama (the fifth class), Avarna (that is, outside the four varnas), Nishada, Paulkasa, Antyaja, Atishudra, etc., were used.

The term 'Scheduled Castes' appeared for the first time in April 1935, when the British Government issued the Government of India (Scheduled Caste) Order 1936, specifying certain castes, races and tribes as Scheduled Castes. Prior to that these population groups were generally known as 'Depressed Classes'. The term 'Dalit', first used in journalistic writings as far back as 1931 to connote the Untouchables, gained currency only in the early 1970s with the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra. As now used, it implies a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights and refers to people who are suppressed on account of their lowly birth.

THE ORIGINS OF CASTE AND UNTOUCHABILITY

The origins of caste and of untouchability lie deep in India's ancient past and the evidence of those origins provided by the archaeological and literary sources now available is, at best, circumstantial. Consequently, scholars have been forced to engage in considerable speculation in their efforts to reconstruct the past history of untouchability. What we now have are not hard and clear facts but a variety of competing theories, all of which have proved difficult to substantiate in a convincing manner.

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The dominant view traces the origins of caste and untouchability to the Aryans themselves and to their ways of relating to the people of India with whom they came into contact. The Aryans, a set of related and highly self-conscious tribes sharing a common language and religion, began their invasions of India from the northwest around 1500 BC. For centuries they remained in seemingly constant conflict with the indigenous peoples, whom they looked down upon as culturally inferior and shunned as ritually unclean. Once conquered by superior military technology, some of these people withdrew into regions as yet unoccupied by the Aryans, while others were incorporated as separate and inferior castes within Aryan-dominated society. In post *Rig Vedic* literature, there are more frequent references to primitive forest-dwellers who were kept on the fringes of Aryan society in the conquered regions. Among these were the Chandala.

Although the Chandala were severely stigmatised in the later Vedic age, it was only in the period between 600 BC and AD 200 that untouchability appeared as such (Webster, 1994: 2). In the *Dharmasutra*s and in Kautilya's *Arthasastra*, the Chandala are treated as Untouchable and the 'mixed caste theory' of the origins of untouchability is enunciated. However, it is in the Manusmriti that this theory as well as the varna theory and the classification of castes in a hierarchy based on occupation and degree of pollution, receives its classic statement.

According to Manu, the ancient Indian lawgiver, untouchability is the punishment for miscegenation between a member of a high caste and that of a low caste or an outcaste. The children of such an unequal pair become Untouchables and the greater the social gap between the two parents, the lower the status of their children. The consequences are also more severe if the mother is of a superior caste. Thus, the offspring of a Brahmin father and a Shudra mother is called Nishada; the child becomes a fisherman. The offspring of a Shudra father and a Brahmin mother is called Chandala; he is the most degraded of all mortals. To Manu, a degraded occupation is not the cause of untouchability, rather untouchability condemns a person to a low and impure occupation. In later times, racial mixture was added as a factor of impurity. In the period after Manu, increasing numbers of the members of the lower castes belonged

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to different races and cultures. The practice of untouchability was intensified and applied to more groups in the years following AD 200, while Chandala became a label not simply for a tribe but for all whom the Aryans considered to be at the very bottom of society.

What has been described thus far relates to north India. The literature from south India suggests that the people whom the Aryans conquered were the Dravidians, who subsequently moved south subjugating the indigenous people. It was only later, when Aryan influence spread to the south, that the varna system and untouchability came into being there.

The eminent anthropologist J.H. Hutton, author of the best book on caste, *Caste in India* (1963), locates the origins of caste in the taboos and divisions of labour in the pre-Aryan tribes of India as well as in their efforts at self-preservation in the face of invasion. In his opinion, untouchability is the consequence of ritual impurity. He says: 'The origin of the position of the exterior castes is partly racial, partly religious, and partly a matter of social custom. There can be little doubt but the idea of untouchability originates in taboo' (ibid.: 207).

Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, another eminent anthropologist, believes that untouchability is an urban development and is the result of an unclean and ritually impure occupation (see the Foreword in *The Children of Hari*, Fuchs, 1950). Once untouchability had developed in urban or semi-urban settlements, its gradual spread to the villages was inevitable for it is everywhere the towns which set the standard.

Dr Ambedkar's thesis on the origin of untouchability, as expounded in his book *The Untouchables* (1948) is an altogether novel one. The distinction between the Hindus and the Untouchables in its original form, before the advent of untouchability, was the distinction between tribesmen and 'broken men' from alien tribes. It is the broken men who subsequently came to be treated as Untouchable. There are two roots from which untouchability has sprung: (*i*) contempt and hatred for the broken men, as for Buddhism by the Brahmins, (*ii*) continuation of beef-eating by the broken men after it had been given up by the others.

Dr Ambedkar tries to explain what he means by broken men. He proposes an ingenious hypothesis: When primitive society began to

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settle down and to cultivate, certain tribes remained nomadic and warlike. They began to attack the settled tribes as the latter were wealthier. In addition, they had grain, which the nomads wanted but did not possess. The settled men needed defenders as they had lost their warlike spirit. They employed 'broken men'—defeated nomads—and stray individuals who needed protection and shelter. These individuals became mercenaries, but were not allowed to stay within the settlement. They were kept at a distance, as they belonged to a different tribe. They were treated with disrespect, as 'broken men' and as mercenaries. Dr Ambedkar provided supporting evidence for such a process from Ireland and Wales. The difference was that in those countries, the outsiders were after nine generations absorbed into the settled community. This did not happen in India, for the Hindus had contempt for the broken men who were Buddhists and beef-eaters.

At first sight this theory may seem rather far-fetched. However, agreeing with the views of Dr Ambedkar, Dr Stephen Fuchs says: 'It is a well-known fact that the nomadic animal breeders of Inner Asia, for example, enjoyed nothing more than raiding and fighting. When a tribe was defeated and routed, the survivors often used to be sold into slavery by their conquerors. Those who managed to escape had to seek the protection of another tribe. Being powerless they had often to content themselves with menial jobs, tending horses and cattle, making and repairing saddles and other leather-work, such as tongs and bridles, making and cleaning weapons, etc. As these animal breeding nomads generally despised menial and manual work, this contempt was also extended to those who had to perform it' (1981: 13). There was thus, a deep social cleavage between the masters and their servant class. Dr Ambedkar believes that the root cause of untouchability lies in a pronounced cultural or racial difference of contempt and hatred coupled with a close economic dependence of the inferior society on the superior one.

Dr Stephen Fuchs proposes a new theory regarding the origin of untouchability (1981: 15ff). According to him, the theories proposed earlier as well as various others presented by a number of Indologists seem to suffer from one great defect: they do not penetrate deeply enough into the past of the dominant Indian peoples.

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They restrict themselves unduly to happenings in India. It is true that the caste system and untouchability developed after the arrival of the Aryans and, most probably, of the Dravidians in India, that the caste system, as it has grown in India, is unique and not found elsewhere in the world, and that nowhere in the world are Untouchables found in such vast numbers—138 million! Yet, the roots must be sought in an age when both population groups lived on the steppes of Inner Asia. Here the animal breeding societies developed a pronounced hierarchical structure. These animal breeders gave up cultivation completely and regarded manual work of any kind as unworthy of a shepherd and a warrior. They also developed a social structure of their own: an extended joint family system with a patriarch at its head in whom all power was vested.

According to Dr Stephen Fuchs, there is sufficient evidence to prove that the Aryans as well as the Dravidians on their arrival in India still belonged to such an animal breeding culture. They must have brought along also their aversion to manual work and to foreign people. The Aryans, on their slow advance through northern India, and the Dravidians wandering down along the west coast into south India, encountered on their way a multitude of earlier settlers who either submitted passively to their conquest or were defeated in fierce battles. As conquerors they managed to impose many of their cultural values and prejudices on the subject peoples of India. Adding to their inherited attitude to manual work and racial purity a new dimension, namely, that of ritual purity, they gradually developed a unique Hindu caste system which was intimately connected ideologically with the concept of untouchability.

None of these explanations about the origin of untouchability are conclusively proved facts. As happens so often with human institutions, no single cause can explain untouchability. It is deeply rooted in Indian history, in the agrarian social order that dominated the Indian economy until the advent of the British, and which remains today India's largest economic sector. Though the relation of India's rural Untouchables to this social order has shifted in subtle ways in the past two centuries, there remain pervasive continuities, especially of meaning and of cultural construction, with this deeply-rooted past.

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IMAGES OF INDIAN UNTOUCHABILITY DURING COLONIAL RULE

Abbe Dubois

Perhaps the earliest and simplest Western image of untouchability is embodied in the term 'outcaste'. In this view, to be an Untouchable is to be beyond the reach of Hindu culture and society, to be almost cultureless. The stress in the outcaste image is on the Brahmins possessing culture and the Untouchables lacking it. Thus, the Abbe Dubois, a remarkable French missionary with first-hand knowledge of village India between 1792 and 1823, contrasts the Untouchable 'pariahs' with those higher-caste Hindus on whom the system has had its beneficent moral effect: 'We can picture what would become of the Hindus if they were not kept within the bounds of duty by the rules and penalties of caste, by looking at the position of the Pariahs, or outcastes of India, who, checked by no moral restraints, abandon themselves to their natural propensities' (1959: 29). The word 'pariah', which derives from the Tamil name of an Untouchable caste, has accordingly moved into the English language as a synonym for the socially ostracised and the morally depraved (see Deliege, 1997).

The Untouchables described by Dubois accept their status and believe in the legitimacy of the system so that there is no thought of equality in their mind: 'The idea that he (untouchable) was born to be in subjection to the other castes is so ingrained in his mind that it never occurs to the Pariah to think that his fate is anything but irrevocable. Nothing will ever persuade him that men are all made of the same clay' (Dubois, 1959: 50, quoted in Moffatt, 1979: 7).

The early outcaste image, as it was articulated by Dubois, implies a major disjunction between the higher 'caste Hindus' and the lowermost Untouchables, or outcastes. The very terms express the disjunction. The main body of the Hindu population 'has caste' and is regulated by its social and cultural conventions, while the Untouchables are outside the system.

Dr Frances Buchanan

Another Western observer of the same period as Abbe Dubois, who surveyed newly acquired territories in Mysore for the British in 1799,

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describes the Untouchable Madiga as follows: '[The Madiga] are divided into small tribes of ten or twelve houses, and intermarry with the daughters of these houses only, in order to be certain of the purity of their race; of which they seem to be as fond, as those castes that are esteemed infinitely superior in rank' (Buchanan, 1807: 640, quoted in Moffatt, 1979: 8).

These two views of Untouchables and caste, the outcaste image and the simple consensus image, dominated Western thinking through the British period. This approach considered that, 'To be an Untouchable is not to be excluded from the culture of caste, but it is to possess this culture in a thinner and less convincing form' (Moffat, 1979: 8).

CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

In recent years, social anthropologists and ethnographers of South Asia have been preoccupied with the subject of hierarchy in the Hindu social system. Definitions of the caste system have been advanced in which the authors have sought to isolate the code which differentiates Hindus into exclusive social groups and ranks them in a hierarchical relationship with one another. Two authors in particular, F.G. Bailey and Louis Dumont, have written on this subject and other social anthropologists have aligned themselves with one or the other theory (Dumont, 1957, 1960, 1966, 1970; Dumont and Pocock, 1957; Bailey, 1959, 1963).

System of Ranking Related to Productive Resources

For Bailey, 'caste is a system of ranks which is related to differential control over the productive resources' (1957: 266). Each person in the caste system performs economic, political and ritual roles and except for certain anomalies, there is a 'high degree of coincidence between politico-economic rank and the ritual ranking of caste' (ibid.). The anomalies are mainly apparent at the uppermost and lowermost ranks of the ritual system. A Brahmin of scant economic means does not fall to a low ritual rank nor can a wealthy Untouchable attain high ritual rank. For caste groups between these two extremes

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'their ritual rank tends to follow their economic rank in the village community' (Bailey, 1957: 266–67).

Ritual Purity as the Basis of Hierarchy

Dumont, however, has criticised Bailey's interpretation of the caste system. For Dumont, ritual purity, not differential control over productive resources, is the code of the caste hierarchy. 'Perhaps as early as the eighth century before Christ tradition has distinguished absolutely between hierarchical status and power' (1966: 56). According to Dumont, the hierarchical caste system is founded on two basic ideological principles: first, the opposition between ritual purity and pollution, which defines the hierarchical relationship between the pure Brahmins and the polluted Untouchables, and second, the absolute separation of religious status, personified by the Brahmins, from politico-economic power, which is ideally concentrated in the hands of Kshatriya kings (see Burghart, 1996: 35–42).

In spite of their differences of opinion, Bailey and Dumont share an underlying assumption in their analyses of Hindu social relations. They assume that caste hierarchy was the exclusive and exhaustive order of social relations in the traditional Hindu social system. Their differences of opinion relate mainly to the nature of the code of that hierarchy. Bailey's theory of closed social stratification and Dumont's theory of hierarchy are seen to be applicable to the traditional Hindu social system (see Bailey, 1963).

Dumont's Structuralist Approach

Dumont (1966) postulated that caste is the most fundamental and most specifically Hindu institution of Hindu society. He calls his approach 'structuralist', for the oppositional structure of pure/impure governs the operation of the caste system. These principles are found universally within India, but they are also unique to India. According to Dumont, caste represents the institutionalisation of hierarchical values. In his holistic conception of caste, hierarchy is expressed in an Indian cultural code of relative purity and impurity,

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in a continuously graded status order whose extremes are the Brahmin at the top—the most pure of men—and the Untouchables at the bottom—the least pure of men. Brahmin and Untouchables are conceptually opposed in a number of ways that contribute to their archetypal purity and impurity, according to Dumont. The Brahmin lives in the centre of the village and is a 'god on earth', while the Untouchable lives outside the village and is apparently excluded from religious life. The murder of a Brahmin is as heinous a crime as the murder of a cow, while the Untouchable is a scavenger and the eater of dead cows. The Brahmin purifies himself in order to approach the gods and thus mediates between man and god. The Untouchable makes personal purity possible by removing the strongest sources of organic impurity and mediates between man and the maleficent 'demons'.

For Dumont, however, this opposition of Brahmin and Untouchable is also complementary—the completion of a 'whole' by two equally necessary but unequally ranked parts. 'The impurity of the Untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahmin.' Since 'the execution of impure tasks by some is necessary to the maintenance of purity for others ... society is a totality made up of two unequal but complementary parts' (Dumont, 1970: 92, 93).

The universe of caste is structured by dharma in the sense of the ever-present order of the universe. Here dharma is an absolute concept; all sentient beings including gods are subject to its laws. In the classic Brahmanical formulation, the social universe is taken to be a manifestation in time and space of the ever-present Brahma. From the cosmic body of Brahma at the dawn of time issued forth the four main castes (strictly speaking, varna), each endowed with a particular quality necessary to enact the sacrifices necessary to sustain the universe. The first-born were the Brahmins who emerged from the mouth of Brahma. They were possessed of the power of speech and were entitled to effectuate a sacrifice by means of their knowledge of ritual formulae. The warriors, who emerged from the arms of Brahma, were born next. They were endowed with the martial qualities necessary to protect the universal order. It was their task to offer the oblation at the sacrifice. The third-born were the Vaishyas, or herders and tillers (in some regions of India they are said to be merchants) who emerged from the thighs of Brahma. They

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produced the material wealth of the universe and were charged with providing the oblation for the sacrifice. The last born were the servants, who sprang from the feet of Brahma. It was their duty to serve the other three castes outside the sacrificial arena.

The four castes were ranked, both in their order of birth and the excellence of their sacrificial function. The Brahmins were the first born and they performed the most excellent function at the sacrifice. Virtue in this system, however, is not defined in terms of emulating the functions of the higher castes; rather it lies in the performance of one's own caste's duties; it is more virtuous for the cobbler to tan his polluting hides and to beat the drum at the village temple than to imitate the superior ways of the Brahmin scholar. In this way, by each caste observing its particular duties, the universe survives as a whole.

Separation pervades the entire caste system. Servants cannot enter the sacrificial arena, for they lack the sacred thread of the upper three castes. The most notorious separation is that of untouchability. The members of the four main castes, which constitute the mouth, arms, thighs and feet of Brahma, do not accept water, which has been handled by those castes that are outside Brahma's auspicious body.

Each person is said to have a certain amount of spiritual energy, or *samskara*, which he has accumulated by performing acts of self-sacrifice in previous lives. Unequal birth and unequal achievement in any particular lifetime are attributed to an unequal accumulation of spiritual energy. This energy also determines one's entitlement to follow a particular path of personal salvation. Untouchable castes are not admitted because the bodies and minds of such persons are considered to be impure, dull or otherwise unfit for initiation. Had such persons more spiritual energy, they would have been born into a higher station in life and would have been fit receptacles of religious knowledge (see Fuller and Spencer, 1996: 35–42).

Critics of Dumont's Approach

Dumont's understanding of Indian society seems to be situated at the confluence of sociology and Indology. His position has been

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severely criticised by several anthropologists and sociologists like Gerald Berreman (1971), Kathleen Gough (1973) and Joan Mencher (1974). It is a common criticism of Dumont that his use of Brahmanical sources in understanding Hindu society commits him to a Brahmanical view of society and that Untouchables may conceive of society differently (Freeman, 1979; see also Barnett et al., 1976; Burghart, 1983; Lynch, 1977). In the last two decades or so, many anthropological writings have been devoted to the cultural traditions of low caste groups; and they have emphasised the differences between the socio-religious ideology of upper castes and lower castes, especially Untouchables, who have traditionally been kept outside the varna hierarchy (see Appadurai, 1986; Burghart, 1983: 281; Deliege, 1992; Juergensmeyer, 1982; Khare, 1984). Had Dumont seen Hindu society from 'below', that is, taken a 'the bottom-up' view, his picture would have been different.

Untouchables Having a Distinctive Culture of Their Own

In her approach, Kathleen Gough points out that cultural differences between the high and low castes are due to political and economic variables generated by the upper castes. Gough has analysed the Untouchable Pallans of south India. Unlike most modern ethnographers of Indian Untouchables, she is emphatically on the side of the low castes and against what she sees as the hierarchical, etiquette-bound high castes. If some of the early observers on caste and untouchability like Dubois viewed the 'nature' of the Untouchables as uncivilised and degraded, Gough reverses the evaluation and sets up tacit oppositions between the inhibiting 'culture' of the Brahmins and the freer 'nature' of the Untouchables. She discerns in the Pallans (Untouchables) a looser, more psychologically healthy, approach to life. In their relation to sexuality and aggression, for example, the Pallans are said to be less restricted than the Brahmans: 'The expression of aggression toward elders and peers (among the Pallans) is not strictly inhibited (as it is among the Brahmins)....Similarly, the lower castes do not favour ascetic control of sexuality in marital relationships.... The ascetic control of sexuality for its own sake does not increase a man's spiritual strength' (Gough, 1956: 847; see also Moffatt, 1979: 9–10).

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The cultural dimension of Gough's approach is 'certain moral values deriving from the Sanskrit religious tradition, of which [the Brahmans] are the main carriers' (1956: 826). Since the Pallans are among the lowest castes, farthest spatially and socially from the Brahmins, they are of all castes in the village the most free of the restraints of this Sanskritic culture. Most of Gough's cultural typifications of the low castes are framed in opposition to negatively loaded Brahmanic traits: 'The low castes place much less emphasis than do Brahmins on other worldliness and on the fate of the soul after death. Engaged in the practical business of earning a living through manual labour, the low castes care more for health and prosperity in this life' (ibid.: 846). Gough's positive restatement of the outcaste image is stated psychologically, but it is set within a broader materialist analysis. The Untouchables' alternatives vary according to the image. For Dubois, Untouchables are in a state of unbridled license, while for Gough, they are in a state of psychologically healthy removal from an obsessive high-caste culture (Moffatt, 1979: 13).

According to Kathleen Gough, the Untouchable Pallans have a distinctive social and cultural subsystem. Gough sums up these contrasts in a personal statement about the ethos of the Pallan life: 'Pallans show an almost fanatical passion for equality within their caste group. In fact, I found the equal and comradely style of life in the Palla street a great relief from the obsessive ritualism, hierarchy, and envy in the Brahmin street.... [The Pallans] react to their poverty [of which they are well aware] with a combination of anger, resignation, wryness and humor' (Gough, 1973: 232, 233–34). Though Gough does not make the point explicitly, the distinctive features that she discerns in the Pallans—solidarity, egalitarianism and the weakness of traditional kinship authority, might be expected to help them to radical anti-caste political action (Moffatt, 1979: 18).

Similar views of Untouchables having their own distinctive culture are found in the works of Joan Mencher (1974), Bernard Cohn (1955), Robert Miller (1966) and Gerald Berreman (1971). According to their approach, Untouchables are seen to have demystified caste and its accompanying ideology, seeing the caste system in an objective and culture-free way for what it really is—a system of oppression. Thus Joan Mencher feels that Paraiyans in south India

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have a more 'explicitly materialistic' view of the system and their place in it than do those at the top and that 'those at the bottom of the hierarchy have less need to rationalise its inequities' (Mencher, 1974: 476).

Bernard Cohn also regards the Untouchables as the bearers of an alternate social and cultural system, different from the upper-caste culture and adapted to the needs and experiences of those at the very bottom of the system. In his analysis of the Untouchable Chamars of north India, Cohn sees the Chamars as differing from the high castes for the same reason that Gough's Pallans differ from the Brahmins, that is, the social and spatial separation between Untouchables and higher castes. Because Untouchables cannot hear the Vedas, or be served by Brahmins, or enter high-caste temples, they suffer from a kind of communication block. The result of this block, however, is not a form of culturelessness, but the retention of a historically prior pre-Aryan little tradition. Unlike the great tradition of the higher castes and of the Brahmins in particular, the little tradition of the Chamars contains a 'pre-Aryan and non-Brahmanic' religion, which emphasises the propitiation of the goddesses of disease and the use of mediums and exorcists (Cohn, 1955: 58). Cohn has to qualify these disjunctive contrasts considerably, however: 'It is almost impossible to sort out those traits which are Sanskritic and those which are non-Sanskritic ... and ... what is idiosyncratic to the Chamars as a group and what is a common body of ritual and belief held by other low castes and high castes as well' (Cohn, 1954: 175). Given this qualification, then, Cohn's analysis amounts to a set of tentatively specified contrasts within an unanalysed framework of cultural continuities.

Robert Miller has studied the Untouchable Mahars of central India. Unlike Cohn's Chamars, who are attempting to diminish the despised cultural disjunction between themselves and the higher castes, to be in a sense revaluing their little tradition, the Mahars, Miller writes, 'have been building a tradition which can hardly be called "a distinctive variant of the Great Tradition cognate to those of the four major *varnas* of Hindu society"' (quoting Singer, 1958: 194). In fact, the Mahars are building on a counter-great tradition which has always existed in India, as an antithesis to the Brahmanic great tradition. In this counter tradition, 'equality is opposed to inequality;

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individual ability is opposed to merger of the individual in the group; emotionalism is opposed to ritualism; escape *from* the system is opposed to movement *within* the system.' Miller's discussion amounts to an assertion that Bhakti devotionalism, Mahar militance and the eventual emergence of neo-Buddhism from the Mahar caste, attest the strength of these alternate values (see Miller, 1966: 26–28).

Recently, Kancha Ilaiah (1996a, 1996b) has asserted the distinctive culture of the Dalitbahujan (lower Shudras and Atishudras) in Indian society. He distinguishes and contrasts the cultural differences between the upper caste Brahmin, Baniya or Kshatriya with that of the Dalitbahujans. According to him, 'Mainstream historiography has done nothing to incorporate the Dalitbahujan perspective in the writing of Indian history.… To make matters worse, recent Hindu politics—and its historiography—has sought to wipe out the possibility of Dalitbahujan perspective and a Dalitbahujan history by simply declaring that the Dalitbahujan are (fallen) Hindus. This essay seeks to challenge that Brahmanical historiography by pointing to the contrariness—and differentness—of Dalitbahujan perspective and history' (1996b: 165).

Gerald Berreman's 'Caste School of Race'

Gerald Berreman has studied the rural Untouchables of a Himalayan village in north India. In a short critique of Louis Dumont's structural theory of caste, Berreman claims that when he presented his version of the Dumontian model to rural Untouchables, 'they laughed, and one of them said, "you have been talking with Brahmins"' (1971: 16–23). Like Mencher, Berreman maintains that Untouchables in some way reject a high-caste model of the system. The Untouchables act in accordance with the system of caste because they are forced to so act, but they cannot be forced to believe.

Berreman's interpretation of Indian untouchability is part of an explicit defence of the 'caste school of race' in American Sociology founded on the work of W. Lloyd Warner (1936), John Dollard (1937), Gunnar Myrdal (1944, 1967) and others (see Béteille, 1992: 15–56). In its original form, this school constructed a comparative analogy between the racial system of the American south

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in the 1930s and 1940s and the Indian caste system. In both systems, there are said to be two or more rigidly ranked groups between which individual mobility is impossible. Membership in each group is permanent and defined at birth (or 'birth ascribed'); each group is endogamous; and each system is maintained by prohibitions on inter-group contacts, especially on sexual ones between males of the low groups and females of the high groups. Ultimately, each system is maintained by the power of the high groups—by coercion rather than consensus.

Berreman's position on Untouchables is a return to the functionalist comparison of the 'caste school of race', adding insights from the more detailed anthropological fieldwork on caste carried out in the 1950s in India. Berreman compares the relationship between 'touchable' and 'untouchable' castes in India with the relationship between African–Americans and white Americans in the south of the United States.

Not all anthropologists or social scientists agree with Berreman's conclusion that 'race relations' in southern United States constitute a caste system. The work, however, is important because it illustrates the value and the necessity of cross-cultural comparisons of 'invidious distinctions' (Cole, 1988: 467). Yet, Berreman points out that the power of high-caste Indians does have a role in maintaining the caste system and that caste is rife with manipulation and conflict. Thus, it does not differ from race in terms of these sociological abstractions. He brings race and caste together as sociological equivalents (see Berreman, 1960, 1972, 1988). Berreman says, 'In the caste system, "Because intensive and status equal interaction is limited to the caste, a common and distinctive culture is assured. This is a function of the quality and density of communication within the group, for culture is learned, shared and transmitted"' (quoting Berreman, 1967: 51; 1972: 400). From this he concludes that each social unit (each caste) is imagined as a tightly-bound cultural unit (a 'distinctive culture') and proceeds to the following generalisation: 'Caste, race and ethnic stratification, like all plural systems therefore, are systems of social separation and cultural heterogeneity, maintained by common or overriding economic and political institutions rather than by agreement or consensus regarding the stratification system and its rationale' (Berreman, 1972: 400).

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Berreman's main point is that power alone, and consensus about power, determines caste and all other systems of structural social inequality. This position is admittedly extreme, but some of its comparative assumptions are shared by other anthropologists who have analysed Indian Untouchables disjunctively. Gough (1973), Mencher (1974) and Miller (1966), in particular, make very clear their personal distaste for caste, in all its social inequities and its oppression.

In contrast to this approach, Dumont does not see caste as an inexplicably 'unequal' system that requires an explanation because of the way in which it violates the more fundamentally egalitarian 'nature' of man. Rather, Dumont reverses the comparative question and suggests that it is Western egalitarian ideology that is the socio-scientific puzzle and that rank or hierarchy is more trans-humanly comprehensible: 'man does not only think, acts [*sic*].... To adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy, and a certain consensus of values, a certain hierarchy of ideas, things and people, is indispensable to social life.... In relation to these more or less necessary requirements of social life, the idea of equality, even if it is thought superior, is artificial' (Dumont, 1970: 54–55). Caste represents the institution-alisation of hierarchical values, the most elaborate known working out of a set of values that the West has been systematically denying for the last 300 years. To understand fully the egalitarian effort in the West, Dumont says, the West must confront its polar opposite in India, hierarchy.

In this comparative epistemology, Dumont differs radically from Berreman and from other conflict theorists and functionalists. For Dumont, to compare is not to dismiss ideological specificities as unimportant detail and to search for abstract, ahistorical essence common to caste, race and ethnic stratification. To compare is to construct a structural analysis of each ideological and social formation, and then to confront these fully and specifically analysed formations with one another (see Barnett et al., 1976: 627–28). Dumont's comparative analyses contain a number of simple logical oppositions, but they are nevertheless interesting. Caste, Dumont says, is a homogeneous moral system that values hierarchy and does not isolate and value the individual as the 'measure of all things'. Racism, on the other hand, is ideologically linked to egalitarianism,

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individualism and to the Western denial of hierarchy. According to Dumont, in denying hierarchy in the social realm as a legitimate innate quality of the relations between humans, Western ideology must resituate it in a rigorously differentiated natural realm as racism, referred exclusively to natural difference (see Dumont, 1960; 1970: 35–55). Thus, for Dumont, Indian Untouchables are not the abstract sociological equivalent of racially subordinate groups in Western society.

Untouchability is a Fall from the Upper-Caste Status

Pauline Kolenda has studied the Untouchable Sweepers in north India. Kolenda begins her analysis by demonstrating that the basic themes in the Sweepers' religion are common not only to higher-caste religion but to themes found in the ancient Sanskritic texts. She then deals with a single disjunction—with the question of how the Sweepers deal with one unpleasant implication of the linked doctrines of karma, dharma and transmigration. According to these doctrines, which the Sweepers understand in abstract form, one's caste status in a given birth is the result of the total score of one's good or bad karma ('action' in accord with one's dharma, 'duty', as defined in a given caste) in past lives (Kolenda, 1964).

If the Untouchable Sweepers were to apply the karmic explanation to their present low status, they would be admitting that they deserved such a status—that they had been unusually wicked in past rebirths. This admission, according to Kolenda, would cause them 'religious anxiety'. Hence, the Sweepers refuse to apply the karma doctrine to their own low status. Instead, they refer their present status to collective myths which state that they were once of much higher caste and fell due to a terrible accident motivated by the best of intentions. According to one myth, for example, the original Untouchable was a Brahmin who came upon a cow mired in the mud. Intending to help the cow (a meritorious intent), he pulled on its tail. But the cow died and since he had been in contact with a dead cow—a polluting contact—his older brothers outcast him and he became the first Untouchable (Cohn, 1954: 113). Not only do myths like this protect Untouchables from the 'anxiety' of karmic explanation, according to Kolenda, but they provide them with a

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positive sense of having once been much higher in the social order (see Kolenda, 1964: 74–76).

UNTOUCHABILITY TO DALIT MOVEMENT

'Dalit', which, as shown earlier, means ground down, downtrodden, oppressed, is now being used by the low castes in a spirit of pride and militancy. The term began to be used by politically-awakened ex-Untouchables in the early 1970s when the Dalit Panthers, a youthful group of activists and writers in Bombay, came on the scene to protest injustice. The Dalit Panther organisation is now scattered and important only in a few places, but the pride and militancy that accompanied the name has created a new category of culture in India (see Zelliot, 1996: 1–4). The name has achieved widespread use in book titles and in newspaper reports on both violence against Dalits and accomplishments among them. The term Dalit is not merely a rejection of the very idea of pollution or impurity or 'Untouchability', it reveals a sense of a unified class, of a movement toward equality. It speaks of a new stage in the movement of India's Untouchables which is now a century old. Dalit self-assertion manifests itself today in a debate on several contrapositions: Gandhi vs Ambedkar, Harijan vs Dalit, Varna vs Jati, Manuwad vs casteless society.

In view of the social location of the Dalits, it should occasion no surprise that they were the last community in colonial India to be influenced by those liberal notions, which reached out to the country as a part of the cultural hegemony of the West. Perhaps the first modern Dalit voice was that of Jotiba Phule, a powerful advocate of social and gender equality based in Maharashtra. Another Dalit deeply influenced by liberal values was the Ezhava leader of Kerala, Narayana Guru, who attacked the institution of caste in a regional society where the Adi Shankara had argued, long centuries ago, of the essential oneness of things in his metaphysical formulation of *advaita* (non-dualism) as the true basis of reality. There was a fair sprinkling of Dalit leaders elsewhere holding out identical messages. Their principal argument was loud and clear. Humankind was made up of a vast community of individuals all of whom, in principle, were entitled to the same social status and economic and cultural dignity.

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Though the Dalit voice expressed itself eloquently from the outset, it was left to B.R. Ambedkar, a second generation Dalit leader, to articulate the abject condition of his community in the idiom of modern politics. Ambedkar also spelt out why Hindu discourse offered no route to liberation for the oppressed classes located within the Hindu social matrix. The Dalit communities, Ambedkar argued, were not stratified constituents of an associational social order. Instead, they constituted the nethermost stratum of an organically integrated social body, held together somewhat tightly by the world view of Brahmanical Hinduism. The only way to liberation for the Dalits, therefore, was to opt out of the Hindu fold.

In the course of empowering his Dalit caste fellows, Ambedkar was drawn into an epic conflict with Gandhi, on the critical question of the Dalit location within the Hindu social order. Ambedkar felt that once India got freedom, his people, the Untouchables, would once again be subjected to the hegemony of caste Hindus and be forced to scavenge and sweep for them. To safeguard their interests, he proposed that there should be a number of special seats in Parliament for the depressed classes which would be filled through elections from special constituencies. While drafting a new Constitution for India in the 1930s, the British extended to the Dalit communities the privilege of voting as a separate electoral constituency. Gandhi opposed this constitutional provision with all the strength at his command, since (so he believed) a separate Harijan electorate would damage Hindu society beyond repair. Instead, he offered the Dalits reserved seats in the central and provincial legislatures on a scale more generous than promised by the British. The so-called Poona Pact of 1932 was a triumph for the Mahatma because it ensured the social cohesion of Hindu society.

According to Gandhi, 'the most effective, quickest and the most unobtrusive way to destroy caste is for reformers to begin the practice with themselves.... The reform will not come by reviling the orthodox. The so-called higher classes will have to descend from their pedestal before they can make impression upon the so-called lower classes.' Ambedkar, on the other hand, believed that India required a cultural revolution to destroy the caste system and his call to his followers was: 'educate, organise and agitate'. Thus, Ambedkar's project rested on questioning the traditional social order in order to

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build a just and an equalitarian society, while Gandhi's interest was to preserve the traditional social equilibrium. In addition to providing leadership, Ambedkar engendered among the Depressed Classes the vital element of self-respect without which the Untouchables movement probably could not have arisen. Under his leadership they realised that it was possible for them to organise, resist and challenge the injustice they were suffering.

Dr Ambedkar's followers formed the Republican Party of India immediately after his death, mainly for representing the interests of the Scheduled Castes and other weaker sections. But the leadership crisis in the Republican Party and the growing attacks on the Dalits made the Dalit youth reject their leadership and adopt a militant method. These Dalits, especially the educated Dalits in Maharashtra, came forward and took up the task of bringing all the Scheduled Castes onto one platform and mobilising them in the struggle for their rights and justice. The caste stigma, which remained even after its legal abolition, was deeply painful to these sensitive youths. They firmly believed in what Fanon said: 'Hunger with dignity was preferable to bread eaten in slavery' (1965: 143). They struggled at various levels in villages, cities, educational institutions and working organisations by means of a number of political and social organisations like the Dalit Panther, mass movements, Dalit Liberation Army, Youth Republican, Dalit Sangharsha Samiti and through Dalit theatre, Dalit art, Dalit literature and among Christians, Dalit theology, etc. These organisations, dominated mostly by youth wings of the Dalit force, worked as pressure groups for educating and mobilising the Dalits and demonstrating in order to get their problems resolved. Dalit consciousness was also expressed in the formation of the Bhim Sena, Dalit Sena, Dalit Sahitya Movement, the emergence of Dalit Rangbhoomi (Dalit theatre) BAMCEF (The All India Backward SC, ST, OBC and Minority Communities Employees Federation), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Bharatiya Republican Party (BRP).

Thus, with the growth of democratic institutions and the 'politics of number' the Dalits began to assume some importance in national politics in independent India. The leaders among the Untouchables, in order to take due advantage of the situation and bring about their liberation, started to mobilise forces in their favour. Today the Dalit

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voters have successfully undercut the dominance of the upper caste and intermediate castes; and have thrown up a new leadership reflecting a social resurgence from below that provides, contemporaneously, an altogether novel complexion to democratic functioning. They are involved in mass social awakenings, providing a share in power, not only in government jobs but in all sectors. Their politics is aimed at a cultural revolution with a belief that unless there is a cultural and social revolution there cannot be a political revolution (Paswan, 1996: 7). This novel politics, which is Ambedkarite in inspiration, rests on a grand strategy that seeks to turn the Indian world 'upside down'; and shape an order of things wherein the hitherto deprived shall not only inherit the earth, literally and metaphorically, but also shape the principles of governance which mould the entire polity. In its strategic design, therefore, the Dalit upsurge of our times is a development of the highest significance, potentially speaking.

The current political initiative by the Dalit leaders only marks the beginning of a new era of democratic politics. In spite of its ups and downs with leadership crisis and demoralisation, Dalit liberation movements have become a force to be reckoned with today. More and more Dalits have begun to speak out openly and courageously and nobody can set their voice aside. They are actively participating in political alliances with other influential political parties in the country.

The chapters in this volume represent the major concerns of the Dalits. The book is divided into four parts. The first part deals with historical material on the origin and development of untouchability in Indian civilisation. Shrirama, after going through the traditional Sanskrit texts right from the *Rig Veda* to the later Smritis, comes to the conclusion that the foundations of untouchability are laid in the Hindu scriptures. This is followed by the chapter by John C.B. Webster that broadly deals with the genesis of the term 'Dalit'. After a historical search on the problem of who is a Dalit, he comes to the understanding that caste alone, not class or religion determines who is a Dalit.

The Dalit vision of Indian society is not the same as the upper-caste Hindu vision. The second section is concerned with this. Mahesh Gavaskar's chapter sets out to study the contributions of

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Jotirao Phule, who laid the foundation for the contemporary Dalit movement and who is also known as the father of the Indian social revolution (see Keer, 1964). This is followed by S.M. Michael's chapter, which outlines the main ideas developed by eminent social philosophers like Jotirao Phule, E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar and Babasaheb Ambedkar, whose influence is very strong in the Dalit movement today. The next chapter by Timothy Fitzgerald further develops the social implications of the ideas of Ambedkar on Indian society. Gopal Guru takes up the question of the Dalit movement in mainstream sociology. According to him, the ideological position of scholars will shape their approach to a Dalit sociology. If some scholars believe that the Dalit movement is limited to achieving partial changes in the existing social order, then their view of Dalit sociology will be different from that of those scholars who believe in the total transformation of Indian society. A comparative study of liberation movements will be of great value in Dalit sociology. This is undertaken by K.P. Singh, who compares two underprivileged communities in two different cultural setups, namely, India and USA. Essentially, the social movements launched by Dalits and African-Americans are based on the ethos of protest directed against their socio-economic, religious-cultural and legal oppression and exploitation. The author is convinced that the emergence of a 'Dalit consciousness' and a 'Black consciousness' has dignified the Dalits and made the African-Americans more respected in their respective communities.

The third section deals with methodological and processual aspects of Dalits in Indian society. S. Selvam critiques traditional Indian sociology which looks at Indian society mainly from a Sanskritic perspective. In the course of this critique, he also makes an attempt to propose a method for the study of the complex nature of Hinduism and Indian society. He is also of the opinion that Brahmanical ideology, in a relatively peaceful and subtle manner, swayed the lower caste mind/attitude so that subordination in the Brahmanical ideological domain was accepted. He proposes that in order to unravel the ways in which first the Dalits, and now the tribals, have been incorporated into the Brahmanical social organisation, studies should be undertaken at the micro, regional and macro levels. The next chapter in this volume, by Arjun Patel, is in the spirit of this proposal.

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Patel studies the Hinduisation of Adivasis in south Gujarat and shows how the tribals have been brought into a Sanskritic way of life at the expense of the tribal culture. The problems of Dalit women are dealt with in the chapter by Traude Pillai-Vetschera. Using information from her fieldwork on the Mahar women in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, Traude Pillai-Vetschera discusses the impact of patriarchy on Dalit women. Even though many Dalits nowadays say that they do not believe in 'Sanskritisation', they have nevertheless adopted from the high castes those behavioural patterns which are oppressive to Dalit women. A Dalit patriarchy has developed, in which Dalit men use the same mechanisms to subjugate their women as those used by high caste men for ages to subjugate women and also Dalits. The next chapter deals on the emerging power dimension of Dalits in contemporary India. Dalit politics has seen trajectories of various kinds in different parts of India. Christophe Jaffrelot in his insightful chapter analyses the power politics of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh. The BSP's ambition for competitive electoral and party politics makes it to go beyond the Dalit threshold by reaching out to new caste groups. What this mean for the empowerment of Dalits needs to be watched very carefully as the Dalit movement progresses.

The fourth and last part concentrates on the economic conditions of the Dalits. Sukhadeo Thorat in his chapter on 'Ambedkar's Interpretation of the Caste System, its Economic Consequences and Suggested Remedies' points out that unlike other human societies, the Hindu social order in its classical form does not recognise the individual and his distinctiveness as the centre of social purpose. In this context, Thorat argues that Ambedkar's view of equal rights would provide the legal framework against violation of laws against discrimination in public and private spheres. Gail Omvedt discusses Dalits and economic policy, taking inspiration from the contributions of Ambedkar. At present there is a lot of discussion on the impact of the new economic policy on the Dalits. This is the concern of the next chapter by P.G. Jogdand. Dealing with the subject of the reservation policy and the empowerment of Dalits, Jogdand argues that the aim of establishing job reservations or quotas in government service and public sector undertakings has been to create a just society by providing a helping hand to disadvantaged sections of

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Indian society. All the same, he laments that the government and its implementing agencies are playing politics over the job reservation issue. Hence, he stresses the need to conscientise and politicise the underprivileged to fight back against the unjust system in India. Dealing on the same subject, Richard Pais has done fieldwork on employment and social mobility among the SCs of Mangalore in Karnataka. He is interested in knowing whether or not the different government protective policies have helped the SCs towards upward mobility. He finds a positive correlation between protective measures of employment (reservation policy) and social mobility among the Dalits.

Dr Stephen Fuchs, our esteemed teacher and guide has contributed pioneering works to Dalit sociology. *The Children of Hari*, *At the Bottom of Indian Society* and several articles on Dalit castes are sufficient proof of his continuous interest in them. *The Children of Hari*, a monograph on the Nimar Balahis in Madhya Pradesh, published in 1950, is one of the first comprehensive scientific studies of a Dalit caste in India. This volume, *Dalit Sociology*, is a token tribute to a teacher from whom I have learned the craft of sociological and anthropological analysis and understanding.

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PART

I

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1

Untouchability and Stratification in Indian Civilisation

SHRIRAMA

In order to lay bare the roots of untouchability in Indian society, this chapter highlights, in its opening portion, the emergence of untouchability in traditional Sanskrit texts right from the *Rig Veda* to the later Smritis. In order to understand the nature of the forces that led to the emergence of this practice, it is necessary to analyse in proper perspective the shaping of the entire pattern of social stratification. This is done in the second part of this chapter. (For an earlier exposition of this perspective, see Indradeva, 1985.)

FOUNDATIONS OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN HINDU SCRIPTURES

The foundations of untouchability were laid in ancient times. The immigrant Aryans were very different from the non-Aryan dark-skinned people whom they found living in India. The Aryans considered themselves superior and were proud of their race, language and religion. They considered non-Aryans to be non-humans or *amanushya* (Deodhar, 1981: X.22.9). The non-Aryans were described as *krishna varna* (ibid.: IX.41.1) or dark-skinned, *anasa* or without nose (snub-nosed), those who speak softly and worship the phallus. In the seventh *mandal* of the *Rig Veda*, Vasishtha says, 'The worshippers of Phallus should not come near Rita' (ibid.: VII.XXI.5). Thus, the Aryans maintained a distance from the earlier settlers or *dasa*s. These *dasa*s were declared to have been created as the 'lowest of all' (ibid.: II.12.4).

In the *Vajasaneyi Samhita* (composed around the tenth century BC), the words *Chandala* and *Paulkasa* occur, but there is no indication that

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they were Untouchables. In the *Chhandogya Upanishad* (composed around the eighth century BC), it is clearly said that 'those persons whose actions were low, will quickly attain an evil birth, the birth of a dog, or a hog or a *Chandala*' (Swami Swahananda, 1975: V.10.7).

The *Gautama Dharma Sutra* for the first time tries to explain the origin of the Chandalas. It says that the Chandala is the offspring of a male Shudra and a Brahmin woman and is the most reprehensible among those born in the indirect order or *pratiloma* (Pandey, 1966: IV.15.23). Gautama calls *pratiloma* castes *dharmahina* or without religion (ibid.: IV.20). The *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* says that after touching a Chandala, one should plunge into water, on talking to him one should converse with a Brahmin, and on seeing him one should look at the luminaries of the sky such as the sun, the moon, or the stars (Srinivasaraghavacharya, 1960: II.1.2 8–9). The Sutras were composed around sixth century BC. Manu rules that the Chandalas and Shvapakas should live outside the village (Doniger and Smith, 1992: X.51). (The *Manusmriti* was composed between second century BC and AD second century.) Manu also provides that an *antyavasayin* should be employed in a cemetery (ibid.: X.39). Apararka's commentary on *Yajnavalkya Smriti* quotes a verse of Vriddha-Yajnavalkya in which it is laid down that on touching Chandalas, Pukkasas, Mlechhas, Bhillas and Parasikas and persons guilty of *mahapataka*s or grave sins, one should bathe with one's clothes on (quoted in Apararka, 1966: 923). It is interesting to note that even Parasikas or Iranians were considered outcastes by the Indian elites (Indradeva, 1980). Samvarta, quoted by Apararka, the well-known law-giver, provides that 'on touching a fisherman, a deer-hunter, a hunter, a butcher, a bird-catcher and a washer-man one must first bathe and then take one's meals' (1966: 1196). Atri provides that if a *dvija* or a person of the first three varnas touches a Chandala, he should take a bath; in case he touches him while eating his food, then he should reject that food and bathe (Desai, 1991: 267–69). Parashara says that if a Chandala or a dog touches a twice-born person while he is eating, he should forgo the rest of his food (Tarkalankara, 1973: VI.66).

Narada mentions Shvapaka, Meda and Chandala. He calls them *mala* or the refuse of human society. He rules that they should always be punished with corporal punishment. A fine from them is

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unacceptable because their wealth is also impure. The king should, therefore, never impose a fine on them (Tagara, 1980: XV.13).

Following Apastamba, Parashara says that on talking with a Chandala, one should talk to a Brahman, take a bath and recite the *Savitri mantra* once; for then he becomes pure. On touching a Chandala one should take a bath and look at the luminaries of the sky: either the sun, the moon, or the stars (Tarkalankara, 1973: IV.22.24). If a Brahmin drinks water from a well touched by a Chandala, he should consume barley water prepared in the urine of a cow for three days (ibid.: VI.26).

Parashara prescribes elaborate proceedings if a house is polluted by a Chandala. If a Chandala enters a house, the whole house should be washed with water mixed with cow-dung, and the earthenware in the house should be thrown away. The householder with all the family members and servants should bathe three times a day and consume curds with cow urine for three days; barley water with cow urine for the next three days, milk with cow urine for the next three days, and finally he should again consume all these things for one day each. Thus, in 12 days he becomes pure. Household utensils of bronze and bell-metal should be cleaned with ash. *Kusunbha*, *guda*, cotton, salt, oil and ghee should be burnt outside the house. After that, the householder should feed 21 Brahmins and make a gift of 20 cows and one bull to them (ibid.: VI. 411–12). A similar atonement has been prescribed if a washer-woman, a shoemaker's wife, a hunter's wife or a bamboo-worker's wife lives in the house (ibid.: VI.43–45). All these castes are considered Untouchable and impure and cause pollution according to Parashara. Parashara prescribes that a Brahmin should keep a Chandala at a distance of 16 cubits.

The Chandala has been declared the lowest of all men. He has been assigned the work of removing unclaimed bodies. Chandalas are called *nirvasita*, or exiled and they have to live outside the village.

Such untouchability has been built into the sociocultural structure of Hindu society. Hence, in order to understand the full ramifications of untouchability as it has developed in the course of Indian history, one should study it as a part of the social structure of the caste system in India. The following part of this chapter concentrates on the very formation of the Hindu social stratification in India and its

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implication for the Untouchables. This is expected to help in placing the phenomenon of untouchability in a sufficiently wide historical perspective.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN TRADITIONAL INDIA

Stratification, that is, the structuring of society on the basis of differential social status of various groups, is a common feature of human societies. But the traditional pattern of social stratification in India has certain characteristics which are rather unique, and these have attracted and intrigued many scholars all over the world. The structural and cultural characteristics of the traditional pattern of stratification in India have deep roots in the past. They have stemmed from certain peculiar ethnic constellations that came into being some 3,000 years ago, and they have been given twists and turns by numerous sociocultural currents through all these millennia.

The roots of the varna system (varna literally means colour) lie in the clash of races. Fair-complexioned Aryan hordes that started pouring into India through the north-west around 1500 BC vanquished and subjugated the dark-complexioned earlier settlers; and thus foundations were laid for a class system based on birth. To begin with, the Aryans regarded the non-Aryans as non-human (Deodhar, 1981: X.228) and beyond the pale of human society. But it soon became clear to the Aryans that it was more advantageous to assign them a low position within society and exploit them on a permanent basis. This was achieved through myths and metaphysics. The primeval myth is that of the Purushasukta (ibid.: X.XC.12) in which the four orders of society emerge from four parts of the great sacrificed *Purusha*.

But the original dispensation based solely on race could not continue for all time. The Aryans like all invading hordes were short of women and they had to marry women of the dark-complexioned earlier settlers. Thus, their racial features were compromised. At the same time, new hordes were coming from the north-west intermittently and they had a fair skin and more pronounced Nordic features than the earlier Aryans who had already established themselves as the dominant elites. These ruling elites, therefore, had to play down the importance of physical features in determining social status. To

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take the place of racial characteristics, elaborate scruples of ritual purity were introduced. The in-coming hordes such as the Shaka, Huna and Yavana or Greeks, were declared to be low for being devoid of ritual and the vast masses of pre-Aryan settlers were condemned to a low social status by being given no right to undertake rituals. This important part that ritual played in establishing and sustaining the social order perhaps explains the unique and excessive elaboration and importance of ritual in India, which has intrigued many a scholar.

The metaphysical doctrine of karma has provided a powerful rationalisation for inequality based on birth and made it acceptable to the wide masses. According to the karma doctrine, this life is just one link in the infinite chain of births and rebirths and each being is born in a specific position according to his own deeds in past lives. He can improve the prospects for his later births only by adhering to, and performing well, the role proper to the stratum in which he is born. Paradoxically, the doctrine of karma—and that of moksha, that is, salvation from the cycle of births and rebirths—arose in the process of protest against Brahmanic supremacy and its extravagant ritualism. The doctrine of karma was systematically articulated for the first time in the Upanishads, which marked a challenge to the supremacy of the Brahmins and excessive ritualism. The Upanishads were composed around the eighth century BC.

Interesting, light is thrown on the circumstances and processes that have shaped the complex features of traditional stratification of Indian society when we analyse texts like the *Rig Veda*, the Brahmin Granthas, the Buddhist works and the Smritis. This is attempted in the following part of this chapter.

RIG VEDA: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ARYAN SUPREMACY

In the *Rig Veda*, the word 'varna' clearly refers to the colour of skin and hair of the people of two different races, the Aryan varna and the krshna varna. Nowhere in the *Rig Veda* is the word varna used for the fourfold stratification of society. Though the two classes, Brahmin and Kshatriya are mentioned often, the word varna is not used to denote them. Even in the Purushasukta, where the origin of the four classes is described, the word varna does not occur.

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The Aryan hordes were quite conscious of their cultural and ethnic identity and looked down upon the dark-complexioned earlier settlers. The latter people are referred to in the *Rig Veda* as Dasas and Panis. Both of these are described as dark complexioned (krshna varna). The word Dasa seems to be connected with the Iranian word 'Dahae', which means 'countryman'.

In the beginning, Aryans hunted and looted the non-Aryans. The poet Vishvamitra prays to Indra to destroy the black people through his brilliance (Deodhar, 1981: III.XXII.21). At one place, a poet says that Indra has destroyed black armies (ibid.: II.XX.7). At another place, we find that Indra has killed 50,000 black people (ibid.: VJ.XVI.13). It appears that Dasas were a militant people. They gave a tough fight to the Aryans. A poet praises Indra for killing Dasa Shambara, a dweller of the mountains in the fortieth autumn (ibid.: II.XII.II). Finally, they were vanquished and were either absorbed in the lower rungs of society or driven away from their dwellings and had to take shelter in dense forests and other inhospitable regions. A poet says: 'Indra kills Dasas and increases the might of the Aryans' (ibid.: I.CIII.3).

Some of the pre-Aryan people were city dwellers and traders rather than warriors. The Aryans were militant and well-armed and they massacred these peace-loving people at will. The Aryan god-hero Indra is credited with the demolition of 99 cities of the Dasa king Shambara: 'And Indra for the sake of king Divodasa demolished Shambara's ninety-nine cities' (ibid.: II.19.6).

Due to different racial features, the disdain of the Aryans towards the Dasas was so great that they looked down upon the Dasas as 'non-human'. And since the Dasas were considered non-human, all inhuman behaviour towards them was justified in the eyes of the Aryans. In a hymn of the *Rig Veda* we find: 'You [Indra] subdued Pipru and powerful Mrigayu for Rjishvan, the son of Vidathin, you smote down fifty thousand dark ones, you shattered cities as old age shatters good looks' (ibid.: IV.XVI. 13). Fire was the most effective and powerful weapon of the Aryans. They used it liberally against the Dasas:

> O Fire due to thy fear fled the dark races, Scattered adobe, deserting their possessions, Glowing Vaishvanara, when for Puru, You burn up and rend their cities. (ibid.: VII.V.3)

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Thus, the Dasas had to flee, leaving behind their settlements in utter despair. Similarly, at another place, it is asserted that 'fire drove Dasas and brought light to Aryans' (Deodhar, 1981: VIII.V.6).

From about 1500 BC onwards, the Aryans acquired the vast fertile lands of north-western India. They badly needed manpower. For them the Dasas were the most suitable source of labour. The Dasas were captured and compelled to work for them. The *Rig Veda* says: 'Indra binds a hundred and ten Dasas' (ibid.: II.XIII.9). Many Dasas accepted the slavery of Aryans. In a hymn in the *Rig Veda* it is said: 'An Aryan leads away a Dasa at will' (ibid.: V.XXXIV.6). Aryans hounded them from place to place: 'The dark coloured Dasas were driven away by Indra from place to place' (ibid.: IV.XI.VII.21). Such hymns indicate that the settlements of the Dasas were demolished more than once. Ultimately, the Dasas took shelter in dark caves and dense forests: 'Indra made *Dasa Varna* low and dweller of caves' (ibid.: II.XX.7). It is stated that 'Dasas lived in darkness' (ibid.: II.XX.7). The word Dasa is used for slaves even in the *Rig Veda*. In later times also Dasa has been the most common word for slave.

PANIS: THE PRE-ARYAN CITY PEOPLE

Another people mentioned in the *Rig Veda* are the Panis. Probably these were a commercial people and were later absorbed in the class of traders in the fourfold varna hierarchy. The Panis are often connected with the ancient Phoenicians. Phoenicia is the ancient name of the coastal part of Syria. These Panis are portrayed as rich cattle-breeders and traders. Culturally, the Panis seem to be akin to the civilised Mediterraneans, but by the time of the Aryan invasion, in terms of race they seem to have become predominantly proto-Australoid. This is, by and large, true also of the people of the Indus Valley civilisation, who probably belonged to the category of the 'Panis' of the *Rig Veda*. The wealth of the Panis lured the Aryans greatly. The Panis did not want to share their wealth with the Aryans. The tendency of the Panis to expect something in exchange for anything that they gave seemed absurd to the pastoral Aryans. Commercial values do not seem to have taken root by that time among the Aryans and they considered this tendency reprehensible.

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In the tenth mandal of the *Rig Veda* we find a whole *sukta* in which the she-dog of the god-hero Indra came to find the hidden treasure of the Panis. In the dialogue, the Panis assert that their treasure comprising cows, horses and riches is well stored in the mountain castle and those Panis who are excellent guards protect it well (Deodhar, 1981: X.198). But, the Aryans found the concealed treasure of the Panis and appropriated it. 'Searching out everywhere, they have obtained the great treasure of the Panis hidden in the cave' (ibid.: II.XXIV.6). Fire was employed by the Aryans against the Panis also:

> Agni, the hero, kills his enemy;
> The poet takes away the riches of Panis. (ibid.: VI.13.3)

The poet here refers to the eminent Aryans who composed the Vedic hymns. Fire is praised because through its help the Aryans were able to open the doors of the Panis: 'The fire is the wisest god who opens the doors of Panis forcefully' (ibid.: VII.IX.2). It appears that before going on plundering expeditions, the Aryans used to drink *soma*. Therefore, it was quite natural for them to praise Soma too, along with Agni (fire), for the success they achieved in plundering the Panis: 'O Soma and Agni, your valour is famous through which you snatched the kine and food of Panis' (ibid.: 1.XCIII.4).

The Panis did not perform the Aryan sacrifices. Therefore, they seemed foolish and faithless to the Aryans. The Panis spoke softly or indistinctly (in the judgement of the Aryans). They did not worship the Aryans' gods and were, therefore, declared godless. The robust Aryans found no justification for allowing Panis to occupy the lands in which they were settled: 'They chased the Panis to the east and turned the godless westwards' (ibid.: VII.VI.3). Some of the Panis gave resistance to the Aryan hordes:

> With loud voice the people invoke thee, Indra,
> To aid them in the battlefield.
> Thou with the singers, has pierced through the Panis;
> The charger whom thou aidest wins the booty. (ibid.: VI.XXXIII.2)

The hoarded wealth of the Panis held great attraction for the Aryans: 'The men together found the Panis' hoarded wealth, the cattle, horses

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and kine' (Deodhar, 1981: I.LXXII.4). Sometimes the Aryans avoided direct confrontation and stole the wealth of the Panis: 'O wealthy dawn; may Panis sleep without awakening. Make us wealthy, we the rich people' (ibid.: 1.CXXIV.10). Similarly, at another place we find, 'They go to steal the food of Panis' (ibid.: V.XXIV.7). All those Panis who did not want to part with their wealth were looked upon as enemies by the Aryans: 'O king, you yoke the ruddy horse for Agastya's nephews and defeat all the Panis who do not give' (ibid.: X.LX.6). Soma helped in finding out the wealth of the Panis: 'O Soma you found out the wealth of Panis' (ibid.: IX.CXI.2). After consuming *soma*, plundering was easier:

> O Soma you looted the wealth consisting of cows (make your presence felt by) making noise in the sacrifice. (ibid.: IX.XXII.7)

Similarly:

> O Soma our crushing stones aspire
> for your friendship.
> Destroy the greedy Pani for he is a wolf. (ibid.: VI.LI.14)

The avariciousness of the Panis seemed reprehensible to the Aryans. They exhort their god Indra not to acquire this vice of the Panis:

> O noble elderly Indra, while gathering great riches, Do not be a Pani to us. (ibid.: XLV.31–33)

In course of time, the Aryans settled down on the land and developed cordial relations with the Panis and Dasas. A poet prays to the god Pushan: 'O Pushan, one who does not want to give make him liberal and soften the heart of Panis' (ibid.: VI.53.3). And we find some hymns in praise of Bribu, a leader of the Panis:

> Among Panis, Bribu is the greatest;
> His heart is as large as the plains of Ganga;
> He who is ready to give immediately;
> His thousand noble gifts of cows are running like wind,

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> Therefore all our poets praise the noble prince, the giver of thousands. (Deodhar, 1981: XLV.31–33)

In due course it seems that the Panis were absorbed among the Vish or the Aryan countrymen. The commercial terminology in Sanskrit owes a great deal to the Panis. Among such terms are *apana* or market, *panana* or to sell, *panya* or commodity, *pana* or coin and *vanik* or the trader. In the word vanik the sound of 'pa' has changed to 'va', which is not uncommon in the evolution of languages. It is common to add the letter 'ka' for making diminutives in the Avesta as well as in the Sanskrit language. The word *vanijya* or trade is derived from the word vanik.

In the Indo-Aryan social structure, this whole class was given the third position; lower than that of the priests and the warriors. In the Purushasukta this class is called Vaisbya or 'the sons of Vish'. In the *Rig Veda*, the word 'vish' is used for people. In the Zend-Avesta the word vish means many families or a village.

We also find Dasas named Balabutha and Taruksha who made gifts to an Aryan poet:

> I received a hundred (cows) from Dasa Balabutha and Taruksha. Vayu, these are thy people protected by Indra, protected by gods thy rejoice. (ibid.: VIII.XLVI.32)

PRIESTS, WARRIORS AND COMMONERS

In the *Rig Veda* we find a society in which any individual of Aryan origin had the right to choose his profession according to his ability and achievements. He could become a priest or a warrior, or an ordinary man. The word 'Brahma' means hymn and also the power inherent in the hymn. Thus, a Brahmin is one who is the repository of hymns. Like all ancient civilisations, in the ancient *Rig Vedic* civilisation too, priesthood was considered the highest profession. A priest had precedence even over the king. But becoming a successful priest was not easy. The priest was expected to compose such hymns that would lull wealthy enemies to sleep and lead swollen rivers to lower their level so that armies could cross them without difficulty.

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But the priest also had to be a master strategist and excellent warrior himself. Naturally, there was competition among various priests for the patronage of powerful kings. King Sudasa replaced Vasishtha by Vishvamitra as his priest. Many of the composers of hymns seem to be priests of one king or another. Some of their sons became composers of hymns while some others found the profession of warriors more suitable. A poet vividly describes that everybody has to do some work or other to earn his livelihood:

> I am a poet, my father is a physician,
> My mother grinds corn with stone;
> Striving for wealth,
> We follow different occupations. (Deodhar, 1981: IX.CXIII.3)

Since the professions of priest and warrior were considered nobler, it is not surprising that many people aspired to these. A poet prays to Lord Indra:

> O Indra, fond of Soma, make me a guardian of people;
> Or either make me a king;
> Would you make me a Rshi drunk with Soma?
> Would you not impart to me wealth that lasts forever? (ibid.: III.XLIII.5)

It appears that only those persons among the Aryans who were able to compose hymns were called Brahmins:

> Brahmanas, the drinkers of Soma,
> Making hymns set their voices at a high pitch. (ibid.: VII.CIII)

Composing hymns was not an easy task. Mere knowledge of language was not considered enough to become a good poet. A poet compares speech with a fond wife who exposes her charms only to her husband:

> A man though knows speech, does not know her;
> Though he hears her yet not hears.
> Like a fond well-groomed wife,
> She exposes her beauty to her master. (ibid.: X.LXXI.4)

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Not everyone could be a composer of hymns. The difficult process of composing a hymn is well described by a poet:

> The heart woven with mental brilliance,
> When friendly Brahmanas sacrifice together,
> Through their attainment they leave far behind,
> Those who count themselves as Brahmanas but are preparers of libations,
> Using Vak (language) in a wrongful manner they spin out bad threads in ignorance, and
> Have to take ploughshares and engage in (agricultural) operations. (Deodhar, 1981: XLXXI.8–9)

Thus, if a person could neither compose hymns nor become a warrior, the only profession left for him was that of the agriculturist. The profession of an agriculturist was considered lower than that of the priest and warrior. These norms of assigning a low status to agriculturists and to all those who earn their living by physical labour, have been inherited by the later tradition. The whole structure of the varna hierarchy is based on such norms.

Entry into the rank of warrior was also quite difficult. One who failed to be a good poet could hardly be a success on the battlefield:

> Wandering in illusion gainlessly;
> The speech heard by him bears neither blossom nor fruit.
> Dull in friendship he is called a laggard;
> Nobody expects him to perform deeds of valour. (ibid.: X.LXXI.5)

From this description it becomes quite clear that the heroes of war often composed the hymns themselves.

Vish was the third rank. Nowhere in the *Rig Veda* do we find a hymn in which a poet aspires to be a Vish or a common man. Obviously those who could not get entry into the two higher professions remained Vish. The Vish are described as those who give taxes to the king (ibid.: X.CLXXIII.6). They were cattle-breeders and agriculturists. Perhaps agriculture became a common occupation later than that of tending cattle. The poet compares the earth with a cow from whom he milks a rich harvest year after year:

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May Indra press the furrow down,
May Pushan guide its course aright,
May she be rich in milk,
For milking year by year. (Deodhar, 1981: IV.LVII.78)

THE FOURFOLD HIERARCHY: ORGANISMIC ANALOGY

In the *Rig Veda* we do not find the mention of the Shudra except in the Purushasukta, which is considered to be of a later origin. The Purushasukta contains a myth about the origin of the fourfold social structure. Here all the four ranks are mentioned together. In this hymn it is asserted that all four ranks originated from the great sacrificed Purusha. The occupations of the four ranks are related symbolically to the parts of the body of the Purusha. Obviously, it is an organismic analogy between man and society, legitimising the varying ranks and functions of different groups. As far as the *Rig Veda*, the oldest scripture, is concerned, the words Rajanya, Vaishya and Shudra occur only in the Purushasukta:

The Brahmana was his mouth,
The Rajanya was made of his two arms;
His thighs became the Vaishya,
From his feet was produced the Shudra. (Deodhar, 1981: X.XC.12)

The Brahmin has been called the mouth of the Purusha and is placed highest in society. His special function pertains to speech. Being a priest, invoking gods is his privilege. The second rank, Rajanya, is born of the arms of the Purusha and has the privilege of wielding arms. The thighs of the Purusha became the Vaishya. The occupation of Vaishya is agriculture and trade. From his feet were produced the Shudra. Just as the feet are the lowest in the body, Shudras are the lowest in society.

The Purushasukta appears to be the composition of an era when the Aryans had already settled down in the Indian subcontinent around 1200–1000 BC. The Vish or the commoners among Aryans required agricultural labour. They employed Dasas. Gradually the Dasas were given the generic name of Shudra. Both these words are of Iranian origin. The word Dasa is the transformed Iranian word Dahae or common man (Indradeva, 1980).

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In the *Rig Veda* itself we find the tendency of considering the profession of the priest and warrior higher and the profession of the agriculturist lower. The people who were employed as agricultural labourers or slaves had naturally to occupy the lowest position in society.

The composition of the Purushasukta and its inclusion in the *Rig Veda* was probably the first attempt to systematise, justify and legitimise the exploitation of the non-Aryan masses by Aryans. The easiest way was to find some supernatural basis. This tendency of imputing divine sanction is a characteristic of the period of later Samhitas and Brahmanas. We do not find this tendency in the earlier parts of the *Rig Veda*. In those parts of the *Rig Veda*, the non-Aryans were considered amanushya or non-humans as mentioned earlier and not the descendants of Manu, the primogenitor. Their subjugation was considered natural. The Vish or the agriculturists employed non-Aryan labour. In an agricultural society, labour force is always needed. Later, through their shrewd farsightedness, the Aryan elites made an institutionalised arrangement that made cheap labour available as a matter of course. Shudras formed the lowest class of the Aryan society. The inclusion of the Purushasukta hymn in the *Rig Veda* sanctified this arrangement as natural and god-given. Society was conceived as an organic whole and all the classes formed its parts. Afterwards, in order to preserve the privileges enjoyed by the upper classes, and to avoid further racial admixture, it was necessary to give a more clear-cut character to various classes. Considerations of birth replaced those of individual achievement and the classes crystallised into castes.

In the Avesta, the land of seven rivers is mentioned as one of the settlements of the Aryans. In this land the leader of Aryan migration, Yim, married a 'demoness' and gave his sister, Yimuk, to a demon. The issues born of these unions have been referred to as 'abnormal' in the Avesta and 'monkeys and bears' in the Pahlavi texts. These descriptions allude to the racial admixture that took place in the early era. To avoid deformity, Yim married his sister Yimuk and thus preserved racial purity. From this myth it is quite clear that during the earliest era of settlement, the Aryans married indigenous women; but when the children born of such unions had dark complexions, snub noses and other non-Aryan features, such marriages

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were avoided. In ancient Iran, where the racial features of victorious Aryans and the subjugated people were not so different, ranks did not crystallise into endogamous groups, which is what happened in India (Indradeva, 1980). In Iran, the rank of priest was hereditary but not endogamous. In India, too, caste became hereditary first. Marriages in direct order were permissible. But in the course of time, castes crystallised into endogamous as well as hereditary groups.

LATER SAMHITAS AND BRAHMANAS: LOW STATUS OF THE SHUDRA INSTITUTIONALISED

In the later Samhitas, hypergamy is permissible. Thus, the Aryans or men of the upper varnas could have Shudra wives. It can also be seen in the *Taittiriya Samhita* that the Aryans used to establish illicit relations with Shudra women: 'If a Shudra woman has an Aryan paramour she does not expect wealth for maintenance' (Keith, 1967: VII.4.19.3). A Shudra could never think of marrying an Aryan woman legally. The later Samhitas and Brahmanas give a number of justifications for the low status of Shudras. In the *Taittiriya Samhita* of the black *Yajur Veda*, we find: 'Among men, Shudra has the same position as are conveyances of the beings [Aryans]: therefore the Shudras could not participate in a sacrifice' (ibid.: VII.I.I.6).

On the basis of the Purushasukta, the Tandyamaha Brahmana propounds: 'Therefore even if a Shudra has a lot of cattle, he is not entitled to perform a sacrifice, as he is without god, no god was created after him, since he was created from the feet, he should not do anything but wash the feet (of the three higher varnas)' (Godbole, 1979: VI.I.II). The *Aitareya Brahmana* puts forth another mythical justification: 'He created the Brahmana with Gayatri, the Rajanya with Tristubh and the Vaishya with Jagati, but he did not create the Shudra with any metre' (Agashe, 1930–31: V.II). In the *Shatpatha Brahmana* a Shudra is simply declared: 'toil' (Eggeling, 1894: V.XIII.6.2.10). These Brahmana Granthas were composed around 1000 BC.

At another place, Shudras, women, dogs and crows are called the untruth itself, that is, the personification of falsehood, and it is suggested that a teacher while teaching should not look at them (Eggeling, 1894: V.XIV. 1.2.31). The *Aitareya Brahmana* ordains that

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the Shudra is to be ordered about by the other (three varnas), he can be made to rise at will, he can be executed at will (Agashe, 1930–31: XXXV.3). Thus, the Shudras were given the lowest position in society. The elites of society maintained a strict vigil to ensure that though the Shudras have been assigned a place in society they should not be considered as belonging to the Aryans. Their inclusion in the fourfold hierarchy was meant only for the service that they performed for the higher varnas. They could in no way be counted among them. To serve the three higher varnas was the sole duty of the Shudra class. This relationship is asserted again and again in all the works of the later periods also.

CHANGE IN THE ROLE OF THE PRIEST

By the time of the later Samhitas and Brahmanas, the doctrine of the four varnas was broadly accepted by all members of society as god-given. We can perceive the change in the ethos of this period from the period when the hymns of the *Rig Veda* were composed. In the later Samhitas, the struggle with non-Aryans no longer existed. The non-Aryans, now the Shudras, accepted the superiority of the Aryans and considered serving the latter as their sacred duty. (This continued in traditional Indian society till the advent of modern times, as is amply shown by the content of traditional literature and also by field studies.) Consequently, the old militant spirit of the Aryans declined. For acquiring the comforts of life, they no longer had to fight. Since priesthood was the most remunerative and respected occupation, a good many Aryans became Brahmanas or priests. The simple sacrifices were made elaborate and expensive.

The priest now was neither a military strategist nor a poet; his sole job was to preserve the hymns and employ them in various complicated sacrifices, which were to be performed for the fulfilment of different wishes. The character of the gods, too, changed. The militant gods lost their heroic spirit and vigour. Around 1200–1000 BC, the Aryans had settled down in the Indo-Gangetic plains. For the settled agricultural way of life such gods were no longer needed. The gods were now expected to fulfil their mundane wishes and solve their day-to-day problems. The centres of civilisation shifted farther east. The land of the seven rivers finds mention no longer. The land of

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Kuru and Panchala now became the seat of Aryan culture. The river Sarasvati in the west and the river Drasadvati in the east formed its boundaries. Broadly speaking, this land comprised the modern states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. The secure and comfortable life of the plains made the priests self-assured and complacent.

The priestly elites preserved the highest position for themselves. There are many assertions in the later Samhitas that are meant to establish their supreme position. It appears that the priestly elites themselves were not quite sure of their superiority. Therefore, it became necessary for them to assert it repeatedly. In all the texts of the later Vedic era, we find glorification of the priestly elites. The *Taittiriya Samhita* declares them 'the gods on earth' (Keith, 1967: 1.7.3.1).

The sacrament of initiation, *yajnopavita*, played an important part in rationalising and strengthening the system of varna. The first three varnas acquired a privileged position for themselves. Though studentship is mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, we do not find any mention of initiation rites. In the *Atharva Veda*, for the first time, we get the description of initiation. The poet conceives the sun as the child who is to be initiated into studentship by his teacher. This seems to be a forced analogy and there remain a number of incongruities. In this hymn studentship is called a second birth.

Gradually, the sacrament of initiation became much more elaborate. The *Taittiriya Aranyaka* (composed around 800 BC) prescribes that a Brahmin should wear an *ayajnopavita* of antelope skin or of cloth. It asserts that the sacrifice that is performed while wearing an *ayajnopavita* is spread out, or becomes successful, whereas the sacrifices of he who does not wear an *ayajnopavita* would not spread (Desai, 1971: II.1). In the Dharma Sutras, which were composed a couple of centuries later, we find that the sacred cord is introduced as an option. The *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* prescribes that a householder should always wear an upper garment, or in its place he may wear the sacred thread (Srinivasaraghavacharya, 1960: II.2.4.22–24).

In the *Shatpatha Brahmana*, the Brahmin and Kshatriya varnas are identified with the twin gods Mitra and Varuna: 'Mitra is priesthood and Varuna is nobility; and the priesthood is the conceiver, and the nobility is the doer.' It is asserted that Mitra or the priest could stand without Varuna, the nobility; but Varuna, the nobility, could not

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